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ABSTRACT

This study of contemporary realistic fiction with settings outside the United States and characters who are citizens of other countries--appropriate for children aged nine through twelve years--sought to discover the differences between those by American authors and those by non-American authors. For the study, 35 books (24 by American authors and 11 by non-American authors) were chosen from "The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books" and were analyzed according to positive and negative concepts; age, sex, economic status, education level, social class, racial group, and personality traits of major and minor characters; goals valued by major and minor characters; and the positive and negative characteristics and stereotypes of major and minor characters. Analysis of results showed no significant differences in any but two categories: non-American authors portrayed major characters of adequate economic status and in the middle or upper social class, while American authors tended to depict major characters as being of low economic status and in the lower class. (JM)

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A COMPARISON BETWEEN WORKS OF REALISTIC CONTEMPORARY FICTION BY NON-AMERICAN AND AMERICAN AUTHORS WHOSE BOOKS HAVE SETTINGS OTHER THAN THE UNITED STATES, WHOSE MAJOR CHARACTERS ARE NOT CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES, AND WHICH ARE APPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN NINE THROUGH TWELVE YEARS OF AGE.

A Summary of

An Investigation Undertaken and

Presented at the Sixth

World Congress on Reading

by

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CS 003 228

A Comparison Between Works of Realistic Contemporary Fiction by Non-American and American Authors

Shelton L. Root, Jr.

The primary purpose of this study was to discover what differences, if any, there are between works of contemporary realistic fiction by non-American and American authors whose books have settings other than the United States, whose major characters are not citizens of the United States, and which are appropriate for children nine through twelve years of age.

The problem seems an important one since there is common agreement that what children read has the potential for influencing their beliefs, understandings, and attitudes.

What if American children are reading only fiction by American authors which deals with non-American characters in non-American settings? Are the possible consequences that they will get biased impressions? Might it not be better for American children to read this type of fiction if it is written by non-American authors? Before such questions can be answered satisfactorily we need to find out what are the similarities and differences between these two categories of books.

METHOD

Sample. The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books,[1] was selected as the review medium from which to choose books appropriate to this study. The Bulletin is widely respected and consulted and reviews more children's books in depth than any other single source. The reviews suggest appropriate age and/or grade ranges, and indicate whether or not a particular books is recommended for young readers. Since this study was not primarily concerned with literary quality, all books reviewed, regardless of recommendation,

were included in the initial list of titles from which the final sample was taken.

To represent recent fiction, those books were selected which were published in the United States from 1969 through 1975 and reviewed in Volumes 24 through 28 of the Bulletin. From approximately 4,000 titles, both fiction and non-fiction, 35 were found to be appropriate: 24 by American authors and 11 by non-American authors. Ten books from each category were randomly selected for the final sample. Since the Bulletin usually suggests an age/grade range of three or four years, only those books were included whose suggested range fell within at least two years of the age group under consideration. (Eg. ages 10 through 13 would be appropriate as would be 8 through 10.)

Procedure. Content analysis was selected as an appropriate method for determining certain differences between the two categories of books under investigation. The instruments and categories employed by Gast[2] in his study of stereotypes in children's literature was deemed suitable for the purposes of the present study and so employed.

Data analysis. Chi square (X^2) was used as the measure of analysis and the level of significance was established at .05. The Yates correction formula was used on all 2 x 2 analyses. The Phi (Ø) coefficient was used to determine the magnitude for all significant X^2 values.

TABLE 1

X^2 for Positive and Negative Concepts

Concepts	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	Ø
Positive					
Explicit	17	20			
Implicit	27	30	.006	n.s.	-
Negative					
Explicit	9	5			
Implicit	6	5	.007	n.s.	-

df = 1
* calculated with Yates correction

TABLE 2

X^2 for Age of Major and Minor Characters

Age	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	Ø
Major					
Child	14	12			
Adult	0	0	0	n.s.	-
Minor					
Child	6	8			
Adult	27	22	.25	n.s.	-

df = 1
* calculated with Yates correction

TABLE 3

X^2 for Sex of Major and Minor Characters

Sex	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	Ø
Major					
Male	10	10			
Female	4	2	.06	n.s.	-
Minor					
Male	17	20			
Female	16	10	.93	n.s.	-

df = 1
* calculated with Yates correction

TABLE 4

X^2 for Economic Status of Major and Minor Characters

Status	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø*
Major					
Low	1	10			
Adequate	5	1	15.4	.001	.77
Comfortable	8	1			
Minor					
Low	7	10			
Adequate	17	9	2.79	n.s.	-
Comfortable	9	10			

df = 2
* calculated with Cramer's Phi

TABLE 5

X^2 for Education Level of Major and Minor Characters

Education Level	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø
Major					
Uneducated	0	2			
Average	11	7	3.06	n.s.	-
Above Average	2	3			
Minor					
Uneducated	3	2			
Average	21	20	.16	n.s.	-
Above Average	7	7			

df = 2

TABLE 6

X^2 for Social Class of Major and Minor Characters

Class	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø*
Major					
Lower	0	9			
Middle	9	2	16.09	.001	.79
Upper	5	1			
Minor					
Lower	10	8			
Middle	18	15	.68	n.s.	-
Upper	5	7			

df = 2
* calculated with Cramer's Phi

TABLE 7

X^2 for Racial Group of Major and Minor Characters

Ethnic	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø
Major					
Black	0	0			
Caucasian	11	3	7.73	n.s.	-
Oriental	0	1			
Other	3	8			
Minor					
Black	2	0			
Caucasian	28	13	17.61	.001	.53
Oriental	0	4			
Other	3	13			

df = 3

TABLE 8

X^2 for Goals Valued by Major and Minor Characters

	Major Characters					Minor Characters				
Goals	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø	Non-American	American	X^2	p	Ø
1. Acceptance in dominant culture	7	5				2	9			
2. Acceptance in own culture	4	1				6	2			
3. Social advancement	0	0				3	1			
4. Economic advancement	0	2				5	3			
5. Self-realization	8	9	15.98	.05	.45	7	12	7.21	n.s.	-
6. Independence	7	3				5	6			
7. Future-past orientation	0	7				8	10			
8. Security	10	6				19	10			
9. Stability	3	8				15	12			

TABLE 9

X^2 for Personality Traits of Major and Minor Characters

	Major Characters					Minor Characters				
Trait	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	ø	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	ø
Introvert	3	3	.6	n.s.	-	8	8	.02	n.s.	-
Extrovert	11	9				24	22			
Authoritarian	3	4	.6	n.s.	-	19	17	.03	n.s.	-
Democratic	11	8				14	13			
Optimist	9	11	1.4	n.s.	-	24	21	.002	n.s.	-
Pessimist	5	1				9	9			
Secure	9	5	.57	n.s.	-	23	21	.06	n.s.	-
Insure	5	7				10	9			
Selfish	0	3	1.9	n.s.	-	11	9	.0001	n.s.	-
Unselfish	14	9				22	21			
Dependable	13	11	.4	n.s.	-	26	27	.75	n.s.	-
Undependable	1	1				7	3			
Honest	14	11	.006	n.s.	-	25	27	1.34	n.s.	-
Dishonest	0	1				8	3			
Infantile	4	2	.06	n.s.	-	8	6	.01	n.s.	-
Mature	10	10				25	24			

df = 1

* calculated with Yates correction

TABLE 10

X^2 for Positive and Negative Characteristics of Major and Minor Characters

Position	Non-American	American	X^2*	p	ø
Major					
Positive	67	59			
Negative	3	1	.12	n.s.	-
Minor					
Positive	110	111			
Negative	55	29	5.44	.05	.13

df = 1
* calculated with Yates correction

TABLE 11

X^2 for Positive and Negative Stereotypes of Major and Minor Characters

Stereotype	Non-American	American	X^2	p	ø
Major					
Positive	57	50			
Negative	13	10	.003	n.s.	-
Minor					
Positive	105	105			
Negative	60	40	2.33	n.s.	-

Analyses of the tables yield the following information and, in most instances, raise relevant questions.

Positive and Negative Concepts (Table 1). Even though statistical treatment did not reveal significant differences between non-American and American authors, is it not probable that concepts, either explicit or implicit, revealed through positive characters have more influence on young readers than do concepts revealed through negative characters?

Age of Major and Minor Characters (Table 2). Even though statistical treatment did not reveal significant differences between non-American and American authors, it is noted that both non-American and American authors employed children exclusively as major characters while both showed a marked preference for adults as minor characters. Is it not possible that at least some books should cast adults as major characters?

Sex of Major and Minor Characters (Table 3). Even though statistical treatment revealed no difference between non-American and American authors, it is noted that both have a proclivity for casting boys as major characters, and that American authors prefer minor male characters over minor female characters by a ratio of 2:1. Is it not time for males and females to receive equal attention in literature for young readers?

Economic Status of Major and Minor Characters (Table 4). Statistical evidence indicates a highly significant difference between non-American and American authors. While a large majority of non-American authors dealt with major characters of adequate and comfortable economic status, most American authors portrayed major characters as being of low economic status. If children were to read exclusively either non-American or American authors, might they not receive unbalanced impressions of cultures other than American? Also, it is noted that non-American authors portrayed well over half of their

minor characters as being of adequate or comfortable economic status. If young readers were to read such books exclusively might they not draw erroneous inferences concerning the economic status of cultures other than American?

Education Level of Major and Minor Characters (Table 5). Although there are no statistical differences between non-American and American authors, it is noted that both have strong tendencies to portray both major and minor characters as having average educations for the circumstances in which they are cast. Would children not profit from books which reveal to a greater extent characters from both extremes of the educational spectrum?

Social Class of Major and Minor Characters (Table 6). Statistical treatment reveals that books by non-American authors were far more likely to portray major characters as being of middle or upper social class than were those by American authors who indicated a marked preference for major characters from the lower social class. While not statistically significant, the same tendency is indicated in the treatment of minor characters. Are not both treatments equally, though obversely, distorted? Might not young readers who are exclusively exposed to either group of authors be subject to erroneous impressions concerning the cultures portrayed?

Further, a comparison of tables 4 and 6 implies a strong relationship between economic and social status with some relationship to level of education (Table 5). Are real life situations as often comparable? Might not children profit from books which reveal examples in which such strong links do not exist?

Ethnic Groups of Major and Minor Characters (Table 7). While there is no difference in treatment of major characters between non-American and American authors, there is a modest statistical difference between

the offerings of minor characters. Non-American authors showed a marked preference for minor Caucasian characters while American authors had a greater tendency for populating their stories with minor characters from the group classified as Other (i.e., Australian Aboriginees, Laps, Mediterranean, Mexican, and Mexican Indian). In the cases of both groups, might not young readers profit from books whose major and minor characters reveal a broader assortment of racial origins?

Goals Valued by Major and Minor Characters (Table 8). While no statistically significant differences are indicated in the goals valued by major characters, it is interesting to note that only American authors showed concern over "future-past orientation." Perhaps, because of a longer history, non-American authors are more inclined to take this goal for granted. In the case of minor characters, there seem to be no important differences.

Personality Traits of Major and Minor Characters (Table 9). Both non-American and American authors portrayed their major characters similarly. A composite major character would probably have the following attributes: extrovert, democratic, optimist, unselfish, dependable, honest, and mature. Minor characters would fare in about the same fashion.

Positive and Negative Characteristics of Major and Minor Characters (Table 10). There were no statistically significant differences between non-American and American authors concerning either major or minor characters. However, it is interesting to note that both groups portrayed their major characters as being almost totally devoid of negative characteristics. Is it not quite possible that children of the age for which these books are suggested are ready for and need books which reveal major characters with a more natural balance of positive and negative characteristics?

The more nearly even treatment of minor characters is largely attributable to the fact that many of them were purposely cast by the authors

as antagonists. The statistical treatment employed could not analyze the degree to which this is true.

Positive and Negative Stereotypes of Major and Minor Characters (Table 11). Although no statistically significant differences are revealed between the two groups, it is evident, as in Table 10, that positive factors far outweigh negative factors in the case of major characters with a ratio of nearly 5:1. It is speculated that this fact may be the result of the commonly accepted practice of authors using stereotypes to quickly define characters.

Again, as was the case with Table 10, the smaller ratio of positive to negative stereotypes is accounted for by the fact that many minor characters were intentionally cast by the authors as antagonists. Although the statistical procedures employed do not verify this conclusion, an examination of the raw data indicates that antagonists, without exception, were portrayed as having many negative aspects and almost no positive virtues. Again, as with Table 10, the question is raised as to whether young readers are not in need of having even negative characters revealed with some redeeming virtues?

SUMMARY

1. These findings and queries are in some ways influenced by the limitations of the investigator's knowledge of the people, settings, and circumstances revealed in the books under consideration, as well as by his own unidentified cultural biases.

2. The descriptors used to arrive at the findings indicated by Tables 10 and 11 may not have been ideal for the purpose of this study. Descriptors specifically selected for a study of this type might have yielded somewhat different results.

3. Because of the limited universe (37 in approximately 4,000) from which the books for this study were selected, it seems fair to question whether American children have at their disposal enough realistic fiction that is contemporarily set in places other than the United States and whose major characters are not natives of the United States.

4. Because of the frequently marked similarities between books by non-American and American authors, there seems room for valid speculation that the preponderance of books by foreign authors are selected for publication in the United States because they are, indeed, much like those by American authors.

5. The subjective evaluation by this researcher of the literary merits of the books involved in this study, both by non-American and American authors is low in most instances.

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[1]The University of Chicago Graduate Library School, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 24-28.

[2]David Karl Gast, "Characteristics and Concepts of Minority Americans in Contemporary Children's Fictional Literature" (unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1965).